



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 4

Issue 6 July

Article 8

July 1977

The Women's Liberation Movement and Its Various Impacts on American Men

Arthur B. Shostak

Drexel University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shostak, Arthur B. (1977) "The Women's Liberation Movement and Its Various Impacts on American Men," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 6 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol4/iss6/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION
MOVEMENT
AND ITS VARIOUS IMPACTS
ON AMERICAN MEN

ARTHUR B. SHOSTAK, Ph. D.
Professor, Department of Psychology and Sociology
Drexel University
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Writing in 1974 about women and athletics 26 years ahead in the year 2000 journalist Lucinda Franks foresees a sexist backlash she tags the "New Male Chauvinist Movement." It all begins with a rebirth of the Age of Reason which, after 1980, includes a new celebration of the humanizing potentialities of sport and games. Women, as prime agents of this pivotal cultural reform, will have advanced so fast and so far in competitive and non-competitive athletics that "the Total Human has been born" and "the average body is no longer just a neglected dormitory for the mind." There is an incredulous quality to the memories women have 26 years from now of the dreary 1970's--

"...when there were no integrated golf and baseball teams, when women athletics were not vying for football scholarships, when indeed it was not known that women are capable of being as strong pound-for-pound as men and, with equally strenuous training, can match or surpass them in many sports."

What is even more, women, exhilarated with their new sense of physical power, have begun the slow process of throwing over the so-called "femininity game"--luring, baiting, and netting a husband--in favor of certain far simpler and far more honest ways of relating with men.

Why a backlash, then, in 2000A.D. from men in the New Male Chauvinist (NMC) Movement? Because women appear to NMC to have usurped every last asset unique to these newly-insecure and ego-threatened males:

"First, women have a stronger constitution and a longer life--their survivability is superior to ours. Then they equal us mentally, and, moreover, claim they have the secret of the universe stashed somewhere in their consciousness. They give birth to life, and now they're saying they're just as strong, if not stronger than we are."

NMC spokesmen demand that women quit competing so successfully with men, a complain that leads Lucinda Franks to conclude her crystal-ball study of life 25 years from now with the tongue-in-cheek observation--"You would think we were back in the Seventies."¹

Touche'. Regardless of the accuracy of her Total Human forecast, the essayist cogently captures much that is true today of the male half of our population. Insecurity, ego-anxieties, confusion, pain, and impatience mark the scene, as American males ask themselves once again, as earlier during the nineteenth century Woman's Movement, what have we done to deserve this and how can we accommodate it? The existential rage of contemporary women, whether expressed as a comparatively straight-forward demand for equity in economic

matters (job distribution, reward levels) or for predominance in sex-linked matters (abortion, sterilization), but especially as expressed in far more convoluted matters (new expectations of autonomy, love, and sex), utterly bewilders most American males. Not surprisingly, when 14,000 women and 14,000 men respond in 1976 to a Psychology Today poll on masculinity the women prove far more admiring of males in general than did the males themselves: while the women seemed able to prescribe a clear post-macho identity for the men, this was not true of the men who could only express a presently characteristic sense of deepest discontent with the male role they had inherited - and exasperating ambiguity about where to go next.

Do American men appreciate the prod of the women's liberation movement? Yes and no, as in any situation where traditional privilege is challenged, revealed as false privilege (contemporary sex roles cost males clearly - and ever-larger numbers know it), and the re-distribution of privilege raises as many questions as it seems to offer answers. Accordingly, many American men evidence considerable apprehension, envy, and even petulant resentment where the Woman's Movement is concerned. Only a minority are known by their excitement, satisfaction, and even relief that the liberation campaign is finally underway, that much sham and hypocrisy are withering, and that new breathing space for female and male role options is finally being secured.

To better understand the impact of the Women's Movement on American males in the second half of the 1970's one must ask and tentatively answer four questions:

- 1) Do males know much at all about the issues being raised by the Women's Movement?
- 2) Are males ready to talk about it--any of it--with one another, and/or with females?
- 3) Are males ready to do anything about it? And, if so, what?
- 4) Are males ready to try to know other males as brothers?

In other words, we must explore four special aspects of modern male-female relations:

- 1) Consciousness-raising, whereby the bill of inditement and call for reform by the feminists is brought to the awareness of American males.
- 2) Communications, whereby the sexes dare to tell and share more than either one thought possible.
- 3) Collaboration, whereby an effort is made to earn something far more enriching than stalemate and far less fatal than capitulation in the so-called battle of the sexes. And---
- 4) Comraderie, whereby cautious males gingerly explore communion and colleagueship with non-competitive others.

These four areas of strain and growth reveal much about the present that happily runs counter to bleak popular impression. Paradoxically, however, this material also raises fresh anxieties about the near future of male-

female relations.

As we shall see, consciousness is greater than is commonly realized. Communications are better than are commonly thought. Collaboration is more tenable than may be suspected, and comradeship comes along as well as might be hoped. Nevertheless, the picture remains clouded by a growing realization that even auspicious answers now to the four questions above amount only to a prologue. A greater-than-ever struggle for sex role reform, one barely underway at this time, still lays ahead. The deepest impact of the Women's Movement on men has yet to be seen, though it is foreshadowed in the four-issue record recounted below.

1. Consciousness-Raising. At first glance there would seem very little here to discuss; there is no male counterpart for N.O.W., Ms, the woman's caucus in Congress, or the myriad other adjuncts to female consciousness-raising.

But, there are embryonic developments, including the first national monthly newspaper, Changing Man;² a spate of new books on men's issues;³ and the successful convening in the Spring of 1976 of the 2nd annual National Men's Conference.⁴ In addition, several hundred men's consciousness-raising groups already exist and persist around the country ("a group of persons meeting regularly to develop each other's awareness of alternative ways of overcoming the limitations on our lives that have evolved from our view of ourselves as masculine or feminine").⁵

To be sure, these adjuncts to male consciousness-raising are not numerically impressive. Only 450 attended the 1976 National Men's Conference, and the '75-'76 spate of books is now a trickle. But they receive an enormous boost and pervasive backup from trendy preoccupations of the mass media: males have their consciousness raised about male/female issues whether they want to or not by the nightly likes of TV's "Rhoda," "Mary Tyler Moore," "Alice," "Phyllis," "Maude," "All's Fair," "Happy Times," "Mary Hartmann," and "Laverne and Shirley". Similarly, male-oriented magazines and tabloids, ranging from Screw, Oui, and Playboy's "Forum," to the feature story and cartoons of the machismo outlets (True, Penthouse, National Enquirer), variously wrestle both fairly and unfairly with male/female issues, as do many popular cartoon strips ("Juliet Jones," "B.C.," "Broom Hilda," "Andy Kapp," "Doonesbury").

The Women's Liberation Movement, with its inherent connection to the problems of masculinity, has already, unalterably, and profoundly raised the consciousness of males--albeit if only indirectly and primarily through the self-serving, uneven, and fickle sponsorship of the mass media.

Something as basic as a comparison of this morning's newspaper with its antecedent 10, 20, and 30 years ago will spotlight the presence today of remarkably frank columns of advice on sex, sexuality, couple-ness, love, and intimacy, along with free-wheeling feature stories on new marital arrangements, or proud dropouts from the male executive world, or single-parent households of near-consummate well-being. Males are exposed to such features with increasing regularity--along with sports page stories of female jockeys, race car drivers, and olympic superstars; and financial page accounts

of female brokers as customer's "men". From the female "anchorman" on the nightly TV news through the presence of a syndicated national survey, "Womanpoll", in the day's paper, males cannot and do not escape constant reminders that something big is underway, something that forcefully raises their awareness of their being male--however they choose to regain perspective on that forced discovery.

2. Communications. Awareness by males of the feminist agenda supports several related developments. In particular, a small, but possibly growing number of men appear to be building on this awareness to attempt to earn new gains in male-male and male-female communications. Gains here are difficult to achieve, however, as they can only be won against the historic male tendency to avoid introspection and exchange.

Men appear to be telling more and holding back less than was ever true in the generation of their fathers or grandfathers. Prior emphasis was placed on stoicism. Men kept their own counsel. They bottled it all up, shouldered their own burden, and kept a stiff upper lip.

Playing tough now seems to be giving ground to new forms of risk-taking in communications. Consistent with general cultural norms today that encourage franker and fuller disclosure, males enrich their discussions on warehouse platforms or bar stools, and around water-coolers or coffee tables. Their ever-more personal dialogue concerns old chestnuts like "Women? What do they want?" along with fresh areas of joint concern, such as "What do I really owe myself? My spouse? My children? My folks? My friends? How am I ever to figure this out, and finally feel good about my answers?"

What do males have to tell and share that has been so hard to dare to ventilate? Psychiatrist Harvey E. Kaye identifies a "masculine mystique" that men must first claim and articulate if they are to ever expunge it: A complex of quasi-mystical attitudes and expectations that permeates a male's physical apparatus, his psychological set, and his social interactions, the mystique "seduces man from what he is, and offers instead a grandiose image all but impossible to attain and still remain human."⁶ Men lose touch with themselves in a morass of exaggeration, caricature, and illusion. Surrounded by conflicting standards, and besieged by unrelenting demands to be more than whatever they are, many feel increasingly insecure, obsolete, and pent-up--ready to explode,...unless they soon tell and share with someone.

The more fortunate and daring find women as well as men with whom they can communicate; women helped themselves by the feminist movement to better appreciate the toll the masculine mystique is taking on both sexes. Males share with such partners previously closeted anxieties over their masculinity, their virility, their general adequacy, and their basic worthiness. Some have found the courage to discuss, and possibly even implement once unthinkable modes of living; for example, the male as an off-the-payroll househusband; or the couple now as swingers. Some go so far as to expose themselves to the scrutiny of their wives where their co-parenting is concerned: together the couple can audit the male's experience and impact as a father and help him improve in one of the most demanding and least-well-prepared-for roles open to men.⁷ Overall, males struggle to communicate more and more often than was historically true of their tight-lipped role, though whether with any lasting significance remains to be seen.

3. Collaboration. The issue here is whether or not the Women's Movement is winning support, and possibly even collaboration from male ranks. Awareness, yes! Some fledging effort at communication, yes! But collaboration--that can be something else again.

Elements espoused by especially bold and/or innovative women liberationists go far beyond much that most males can now endorse. For example--

"...What all feminists want or should want, regardless of sexual orientation, is a world where gender makes no difference."
Karen DeCrow, President, N.O.W.

Housewives should organize a "company" to put themselves on a legal payroll, pay each other the going rate for an exchange of household services, and receive the benefits of being "employed", including worker's compensation, Social Security, health and medical protection, and even a pension plan.
(Dr. Jessie Hartline, Economist, Rutgers University).

No less easy to take are major assumptions that view the oppressive subjugation of women as part of a Grand Patriarchal Scheme, a tacit conspiracy, consensually agreed upon, which allows men to retain their pre-eminent position. There is a related assumption that mutual affection, regard or love, if they exist at all, are either illusory, delusional, or of miniscule import when viewed against the background of an awesome power struggle.

Similarly, mainstream males find much to question in the ideas of certain male liberationists:

"Some form of socialism will probably be necessary in order to achieve human liberation." (Harvey Cox, Christianity and Crisis, October 4, 1971).

"... Just as our daughters as well as our sons should have strength, courage, and independence, so should our sons as well as our daughters have sensitiveness, tenderness, and gentleness." (Monroe H. Freedman, ACLU Civil Liberties, May 1972).

Still more controversial yet is talk of male collaboration in sharing scarce jobs with females who may be secondary wage-earners, or male collaboration with females who want male votes for women candidates who are being backed by a feminist caucus primarily on gender criteria. Male reactions to feminist calls for salaries for housewives, annually re-negotiated marriage contracts, or for the subsidized availability of public boarding schools or kibbutz-like children's houses is quite adverse, as such reforms are feared as anti-family in tone and intent.

For many males the "bottom-line" impediment to collaboration is the threat they perceive in the Women's Movement to their male role as primary bread-winners. In a situation of no-holds-barred competition for increasingly scarce job slots, opposition to liberation remains strong among competing

white males and non-white males alike. Only a vast job-creation effort by the public (and private?) sector(s) can head off a major showdown in this matter--one which can even dwarf the otherwise major backlash engendered among males by feminist calls for radical changes in marriage and family.

Which is not to say that males refuse all forms of possible collaboration:

In 1953, only 21% of men felt it would make no difference whether they worked for a woman or a man. By 1975, the figure had risen to 32%. Similarly, in 1953, 75% of males preferred to work for a man. The comparable figure in 1975 was down to 63%. (Gallop Poll, March 1976).

In 1938, only 19% of all men approved of a wife working if she had a husband capable of supporting her (women, 25%). In 1975, the figure had risen to 65% (women, 70%). (Ibid).

50% of all males feel women do not have equal job opportunities, and almost 80% of those men feel they should! (Ibid)

50% of all males oppose a constitutional amendment which would prohibit abortions except when the pregnant woman's life is in danger--as contrasted to 47% of all women. Only 42% of all males support it, while 48% of all women do! (Ibid)

59% of males favor the ERA amendment, as contrasted to 55% of females. Only 23% of males oppose, while 26% of women do! (Ibid)

88% of males say they would vote for a woman running for Congress if qualified, and 75% would do so for a female presidential candidate. (women's comparable numbers are 89% and 71%). (Ibid)

Almost 90% of 14,000 men in the 1976 Psychology Today poll on masculinity said it was acceptable with them for their wives to earn more money. The men in this poll want to be more warm and loving than they are; the macho male who is tough, strong, aggressive, and has many sexual conquests is not admired. (Psychology Today, January 1977, pp.35,82).

As well, as yet untapped possibilities for collaboration exist in reform campaigns of potentially sharp interest to both sexes: If job dissatisfaction, for example, is as widespread as certain researchers contend, many males may join feminists in calling for job enrichment, flexible job hours, shorter work commitments, and easy job re-entry and re-training. If parent-role dissatisfaction is as widespread as alledged, many males can and may support feminist calls for parenting education in high schools, the option of subsidized day care, and the provision of subsidized family and/or parent counselling and therapy.

Overall, however, the present-day state of collaboration leaves much to be desired. The Women's Movement has thus far earned more collaboration than ever before true, and less than ever before necessary; by and large males make only trivial concessions and offer little save that wrestled from them. (I am reminded of Letty Coltin Pogrebin's counsel in Ms, January 1977: "Only emotional empathy, decency, and a sense of fairness can motivate a man's desire to change").⁸

Why this is so and what must happen if it is ever to be otherwise is a matter with which this essay will close, but first, there is the prior and related issue of the relationship of man to man.

4. Comraderie. Men are infrequently friends of one another, more often cautious acquaintances, and most commonly cagey competitors:

"...Men have carried the practice of emotional restraint to the point of paralysis... the ritual affirmations of membership in the fraternity of men that one gets from participation in 'masculine' activities do nothing to assuage the feeling of being essentially alone; they have become a poor substitute for being known by and knowing other people."⁹

Psychologist Sol Gordon puts it this way:

"...I personally, as a man, am sick and tired of dying 10 to 15 years before women; I'm fed up with all the heart attacks and ulcers, fed up with not being able to have an affectionate relationship with a male without the fear of being diagnosed."¹⁰

Men find very strange on their ears the sound of feminists calling one another "sister," and apologizing, as has Karen DeCrow, N.O.W. President, for harboring prejudice and practicing discrimination against other members of one's own sex.

Provoked in part by the everpresent example of comraderie inside the Women's Movement, more and more men, especially young adults, are reaching out to one another in fresh and newly fulfilling ways. For some this means the on-going upswing in the number of campus males joining greek-letter fraternities. For others it manifests itself in a decided surge in the membership of male amateur sports teams (bowling, softball, curling, darts.) An unknown number are joining the nationwide network of men's groups, and still others are more passively--but no less keenly--pursuing their curiosity about other men through the new literature and the new films on men's issues, for example, "Husbands," "I Never Sang for my Father," "The King of Marvin Gardens," "Five Easy Pieces," and "Save the Tiger."

Whatever the approach, the goal is to develop a deep mutual respect, trust, and pleasure in the company of another male. Called "buddyship" by psychologist Herb Goldberg, this is the deepest of male-male interactions, one with rich dimensions that "generally cannot exist even in the deepest male-female relationships."¹¹ The art of buddyship in our culture, Goldberg explains, remains underdeveloped "because it requires time, a willingness to work through crises, to upset one's heterosexual partner, to

endure hostile suggestions and innuendos about latent homosexuality, and a social maturity and competence that is not culturally recognized or rewarded the way that, for example, marriage is." ¹² Its rewards, however, if achieved, are "great because of their mutually supportive, nourishing, no-strings-attached aspects."

It will not do to exaggerate the success as yet of this phenomena, as age-old barriers to its success remain many and formidable. The barriers to male-male comraderie have probably given way less to the impact of the Woman's Movement than many men and women might hope; and this despite the aforementioned gains males seem to be making in talking more frankly with one another. Perhaps it is a case here of a reasonable time lag, with comraderie a long, if likely step behind the relatively-new effort at joint communication. Perhaps, . . . though, one can grow impatient waiting for supporting evidence.

Summary: On Looking Around, Back, and Foreward. As ample available data are sadly lacking the foregoing has necessarily been an impressionistic and speculative attempt to consider four major facets of the question--What is the impact of the Women's Movement on American males?

The first sub-question asked if males were aware of the liberation issues being raised by feminists. A strong affirmative answer was based on the pervasive influence of the media, especially trendy "sit-com" weeklies. The second sub-question asked if males were struggling to talk over these issues, both with one another and with females. A qualified affirmative answer focused on the post-60's cultural norms that invite franker and fuller discourse in many realms of private life. The third sub-question asked if males were ready to collaborate with feminists in attitudinal and action reform matters. While evidence of attitudinal convergence was available from Gallop polls, several contrary reasons for male hesitation, and even opposition, were reviewed. Finally, the fourth sub-question asked if males were able yet to seek, create, and maintain deep heterosexual friendships with other males. While a theoretical case was readily made for "buddyship," it was thought that obstacles to this still outweigh inducements--however lonely are many friendless American males.

Having gone this far out on a "think piece" limb, I would venture now to extend these reflections into speculations about the near-future of this subject. I draw for support both on an instructive historical analogue and on the prescriptive writings of Kurt Lewin.

Where is any of this likely to go next? What is the larger significance of the four-fold impact to date of the woman's movement on those men who "know", listen and talk anew, lend support, and even dare to reach out to one another.

History, especially that of America's recent 1830-1920 period records earlier epochs much like our own--with perplexing resolution. A nineteenth century woman's movement, linked with pioneering social welfare campaigns, and, tangentially, with temperance, anti-vivisectionist, and vegetarian movements, stirred considerable response from turn-of-the-century males. It led eventually to a host of salient battle-of-the-sexes compromises including the 19th Amendment vote for women; protective labor legislation; new educational and career opportunities; and public family-planning clinics.

Overall, however, males made concessions begrudgingly, and went on to mastermind a 20th century America so basically inimical to the interests of feminists as to require the desperate rebirth in the early 1960's of a full-blown, new Woman's Movement.

If we are to advance beyond this pattern of "one-step-forward, one-step back", we must learn from history to base our sex role reforms on a careful strategy of perspective and vision. That is, we need a plan both grounded in historic lessons and also forward-looking in its ability to help us reach beyond our daily existence.

Kurt Lewin's advocacy of a three-part reform strategy comes to mind--first, to unfreeze; then to accomplish new learning and move to a new level; and finally, to refreeze. Lewin's goal of social action means doing something to unsettle, or unfreeze, the prevailing level of discrimination. Next, one builds group strength, group-based self-esteem, group discussion, discussion with decision, and participation in decision-making so as to strengthen liberative forces and weaken repressive forces. Finally, one struggles to establish a level of new norms, a settling point must be maintained for a sufficient period of time for it to become an accepted social fact of life--and a later launching pad for an entirely new and related reform cycle.¹³

Applying this schema to contemporary men's issues it seems clear that the campaign to unfreeze is dramatically underway. Guided in large part by the example of the Woman's Movement, a comparable men's reform effort is slowly aborning--with all the commonly attendant anxieties and uncertainties. A slowly-emerging, and barely articulated agenda of male reform concerns include:

Equity with women in child-custody, child-support and alimony verdicts, plus court support of the visitation rights of divorced fathers.

Equity in competition with women for increasingly scarce entry-level jobs, and career advancements.

Supplementation via school seminars and courses for inadequate home preparation in sexuality, love relationship skills, and the art of living in the roles of spouse, household head, parent, and adult child of oldsters.

Exploration of the possible use of overseas reforms, such as the Swedish plan that allows a new father to stay at home with his infant for up to seven months while collecting 95% of his salary (if the mother also works, the parents may split the 7-month period between them any way they please).

Ahead presumably lays demanding years of effort to coalesce male unity on behalf of these male gains, the better to help both sexes renegotiate from health and love the entire social contract that a male sexist cultural order presently imposes harshly on all.

This arduous process of moving America to a new level may be appropriately followed by a temporary respite in the 1980's. After that time our now grown-up grandchildren may choose to move anew to unfreeze our no-longer-adequate accomplishments on behalf of their own agenda, say, one focused on androgyny, bi-sexuality, and eroticism--the concerns of a post-industrial world that we can barely glimpse, and dare not judge from way back here. They may have the courage and craft we presently lack to look deeply into the psychoanalytic roots of mysandry and mysagony, daring thereby to help themselves gain desperately needed relief from the murderous toll of hatred between the sexes. And they may choose to explore anew the profound links between systems of economics and related sex role paradigms: Are we capitalist males and females, and how might we differ as socialist beings? In their post-industrial, cybernetic, global corporation, world federalist social order in the 1990's even these 1970 formulations will probably require reformulation--but the battle of the sexes, and the sway of the economic foundation of things will probably confound us long into the foreseeable future.

What then, is the major significance of the Women's Movement on American men? Nothing less than the extraordinary unfreezing at this time of the entire masculine mystique scene, for females and males alike, and the opening thereby of new possibilities for all to finally come in out of the cold.

"It would be arrogant to assume that women can save the world, that women can bring men back to reality. But we have our struggle, and our sisterhood, and they are beginning to lose control. Certainly it would be better if we loved each other."

Sally Kempton,
N.Y. Times Book
Review, April 25,
 1971, p. 55

FOOTNOTES

1. Lucinda Franks, "Women in Motion: It's Not Who Wins or Loses, But How Many Play the Game." In Woman in the Year 2000, edited by Maggie Tripp. Laurel: 1974, pp. 259-274.
2. Available for \$5 a year from the Men's Resource Center, 3534 S.E. Main St., Portland, Oregon 97214.
3. See, for example, Jack Nichols, Men's Liberation, Penguin: 1975; Herb Goldberg, The Hazards of Being Male, Nash: 1976; John W. Petras, Sex: Male/Gender: Masculine, Alfred: 1975; Hendrick M. Ruitenbeck, The Male Myth, Dell: 1967; Marc Feigen Fastean, The Male Machine, McGraw-Hill: 1974; Joseph H. Pleck and Jack Sawyer, Men and Masculinity, Prentice-Hall: 1974; Ross Firestone, ed., A Book of Men, Stonehill: 1975; Deborah S. David and Robert Brannon, eds., The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role, Addison-Wesley: 1976; Warren Farrell,

The Liberated Man, Bantam: 1975.

4. George Blackman, "National Men's Conference." Changing Man, September 1976. p. 9.
5. Warren Farrell, The Liberated Man, op.cit., p. 201.
6. Harvey E. Kaye, Male Survival: Masculinity Without Myth. Grosset and Dunlap: 1974, p.3.
7. Helpful here is What's A Father For?, by Sara D. Gilbert. Parents' Magazine Press: 1975.
8. Pogrebin, Letty C. "Can I Change Him?" Ms., January 1977 p. 44.
9. Fasteau, The Male Machine, op. cit., p. 18.
10. As quoted by Lisa Connally, in "The Sol Gordon Performance," Human Behavior, January 1977. p. 28.
11. Goldberg, The Hazards of Being Male, op. cit., p. 144
12. Ibid., p. 145.
13. See in this connection, David Loye, The Healing of a Nation. Delta: 1971.